



What will Further Education Mean in 2025?

Report of an Open Agenda Event at St. George's House, Windsor Castle, 7th – 8th December 2006

The focus for this event was to explore what Further Education will mean in 2025. Emphasis should be placed on the word 'explore' as a description of our discussions. Our purpose was not to gain a consensus, and we weren't seeking to put in place an action plan for the next 20 years. Our intention was to develop our thinking about what further education may look and feel like for it to be fit for purpose in 2025, and what this means for us now in navigating the sector's direction of travel.

As with all Open Agenda reports, this report aims to reflect the main ideas and views put forward during the event, with the understanding that not everybody involved in the discussions endorsed all of the ideas included. Nor should this report be viewed as a policy statement on behalf of the Department for Education & Skills. Phrases that are italicised are direct quotes from the event, and a list of participants is included at the end of the report.

As our starting point, we recognised that the sector that will have significantly changed through policies and reforms that are being adopted and put into practice now. For the purpose of our discussions, we took the successful implementation of these policies as givens.

We also acknowledged that further education would be taking place in a different world and subject to many factors over which the sector has no control. Rather than attempt to predict how the sector should respond to a range of possible scenarios, we agreed that what we should concentrate on is increasing the capacity of the sector to respond rapidly and effectively to changes.

What we felt with some certainty is that whatever changes happen, "*what we value through experience of learning will change. The ability to memorise facts will be of less value*" as new technologies enable us to find information quickly and easily. It won't be knowledge that will need to be taught but "*how to access and use knowledge.*" Education will be focused on developing learners' "*ability to manage information, their creativity and capacity for independent thought.*"

While policies and reforms are supporting the development of further education in this direction some argued "*we need to look over the horizon more often*", so that what will be valued from learning in future is more clearly in our sights now. For example, we need to consider how we will assess what will be valued in learning, and how the role of teachers and the delivery of learning will need to change to "*provide what we will value in the future.*"

This report begins with an outline of a matrix that describes what further education will need to encompass in 2025 (pages 2 - 4). It continues by looking at what Further Education might mean from 5 different view points (pages 4 - 5 as a way of highlighting the inclusive nature of further education, and why the sector needs to be multi-faceted and flexible.

The report then highlight views on what it was felt that the State's role should be in supporting the evolution and progress of the sector in moving toward where it wants to be in 2025 (pages 5 - 6), and where more leadership, urgency and energy should be given by the sector itself in bringing about specific aspects of change (page 6).

A matrix to describe what Further Education means

We all signed up to the view that the over-arching goal for further education must be to help enable "*employment and social opportunity*", but recognised that, on its own, this goal needs further definition to provide:

- a sense of "*the balance and connection between the two strands*" contained within the goal;
- a system that includes "*skills needs defined by the State*" within a demand-led portfolio of provision, purchased through a mix of public, employer and individual funding;
- a country-wide "*system*" of further education that allows for the "*mobility of learners*"; and
- individual institutions and organisations the scope to "*brand and deliver their provision in a way that attracts potential customers.*"

There was support for the idea of expressing the further definition needed in the form of a 3-strand matrix that charts:

1. the specific purposes or goals that different learners and the State want to achieve through further education;
2. the target group the learning provision is aimed at;
3. promotion, access and progression design.

Strands that we didn't explore in detail, but could usefully be included as part of a matrix are sources of funding (State; employer; individual), and impact/success measures.

1. The specific purpose or goal learners and the State want to achieve through further education

We were not suggesting that the goals listed below are mutually exclusive. Some are a shared goal or purpose of employers, individuals and the State: they are, however, expressed in different ways. Many pointed out that it is especially important to recognise this difference when considering promotion, access and progression design and, of course, funding. The goals identified included:

- Career success
- Business Development
- Economic Development
- Health and well being
- Social cohesion
- "*Picking up the pieces*" – redressing the failure of earlier educational experiences¹
- Leisure, personal development and entertainment

¹ Today, more than a one third of adults do not hold the equivalent of a basic school-leaving qualification . . . over 70% of our 2020 workforce have already completed their compulsory education. Foreword, Leitch Review of Skills, Final Report

2. The target group the learning provision is aimed at

We identified three broad groups. Naturally, within these groups further definition could be made within the matrix. Ideas about the further groups that need to be defined that were put forward at the event have been included in brackets.

- **Communities** (further defined by "*disadvantaged geographical areas, groups of individuals drawn together by common issues*" or difficulties)
- **Employers** (further defined by size, sector, rising or falling economic importance, location)
- **Individuals** (further defined by work status, ensuring equality of opportunity for minority groups, eg: ethnic minorities, disabled people, older people)

3. Promotion, access and progression design

We recognised that for the sector to be responsive to a wide range of different groups with different reasons for participating in further education, it needs to recognise within an overall matrix "*different approaches to promotion, access and progression.*" Three were highlighted though, no doubt, there could be others added to a matrix.

- **Direct access:** through, example, promotion through a website that could include feedback from users, recommendation by word of mouth, and other forms of direct advertising and promotion.
- **"Mediated access":** through information, advice and guidance and brokerage services. This route would be designed for individuals, groups and employers who need help in identifying how learning would enable them to achieve a particular goal and/or finding what they need. Generally, it was felt that mediated access is especially appropriate for:
 - ➔ vulnerable groups of individuals and those lacking motivation, and
 - ➔ businesses of all types which are unaware of the benefits of training, funding and delivery options,
 - ➔ Union members with Union Learning Representatives taking on an enhanced role in advising employees working in a particular sector, rather than for a particular employer. This could open access to employees working for small and medium-sized firms.
- **"Stages not ages":** by 2025, the trend towards creating a "*personalised approach*" to learning is likely to be the norm. In addition, new employment patterns that will mean that individuals are likely to have several careers in their lifetime.

Outside of the acquisition of Skills for Life, a consequence of this is a shift away from rigid expectations about the levels of competence individuals should have achieved by a certain age. It was strongly advocated that these expectations should be replaced by a personalised approach to learning, building on policy trends in this direction that are being introduced in statutory as well as further education.

“Does the matrix add up to a proper system?”

The concept of a matrix emerged as we considered how best to define the purpose of further education and what it should mean in 2025 (drawing on both the Foster and Leitch Reviews). Someone then took this a stage further by asking *“but does this add up to a proper system?”*

Of course the answer is no: a matrix isn't a system, but it does reflect the breadth of activity and the need for variation within the system in order to be effective.

The concept would need further working up, but it could provide a framework for the Department and Learning & Skills Council to gain an overview of what is being delivered through Further Education, to whom and how. There was enthusiasm for the idea that this could provide a starting point to achieve the difficult balance sought between driving the uptake of “economically valuable skills” and encouraging this uptake through a demand-led system.

A matrix approach could also encourage specialisation amongst providers and institutions, while maintaining a balanced ‘whole’ within the sector.

From the consumers' point of view they are unconcerned with what the sector does as a whole. Their concern is that an institution or provider is able to provide them with the training or learning they want. This is why so many felt that it is important for institutions and providers to *“have a strong identity and brand”* in order to promote what they offer successfully.

At the same time, it is important to have confidence that the sector as a whole is performing well. This doesn't mean *“all doing the same.”* Rather, it means all institutions and providers should be working to their strengths. A matrix approach could provide this overview and help to identify where *“more provision may be needed and public funding directed.”*

Further Education in 2025 from five different viewpoints

During the event we decided to explore what further education might feel and look like in 2025 from five very different viewpoints. Although these are very much imagined ‘thumbnail sketches’, they do help to bring to life how further education means very different things to different people.

- **An employer running a company of around 25-30 employees** The company is knowledge intensive with global markets. It accesses information about training, along with other services through Google. The company generally avoids training its workforce, but is pleased that it can train its lower-skilled workers through access to Government funding. It offers internships to young people, as this is a good opening into the sector for them and a cost effective practice for the company.
- **An older worker** This individual is provided with the necessary support and brokerage service to help them understand how they can make choices, and what these comprise. A real benefit is access to learning that is not run along the old pattern of September to July courses.

- **A 16 year old** Taking their Diploma, this individual made their first choice of career path at 14 years. They are spending 2 days at college, 2 days at school and 1 day in the workplace.
- **A 22 year old offender with no history of work** This person trained for a job while in prison, and is continuing to learn since their release. In addition to the training received, re-housing has been provided in a community away from influences that contributed to offending behaviour. The ex-offender has received a grant for a business start-up that will utilise the new skills acquired.
- **A lecturer** In 2025, professionals working in the sector no longer operate under this title nor are individuals attached to a specific institution. Instead individuals are "*licensed to skill*". They are members of a professional body responsible for all post-16 teachers. The structure is one of a loose federation, with peripatetic clusters of teachers working in a range settings, including social enterprises. All professionals use technology as part of a portfolio of teaching methods.

What the first four of these examples highlight is in 2025, just as today, a single further education institution or provider may be expected to meet a range of different expectations and needs. The fifth example illustrates how it is felt strongly that the success of meeting these expectations and needs is dependent upon a professional, flexible and mobile workforce. Indeed, there was strong support that the focus for regulation should be on those delivering learning rather than provision: "*the profession should be tightly regulated and the curriculum less so.*"

These sketches affirm what we already know: that a highly structured, one size fits all approach to further education will **not** support the multi-faceted approaches it needs to adopt in order to be successful. The sketches also support the idea of developing a matrix of the different facets which will allow specialisation for providers, and also an overview of how the sum of the parts contributes to success of the sector as a whole.

One idea put forward that we felt worthy of further exploration is that within the sector "*there are fewer institutions but more providers.*" Naturally, this structure would only work if developed from open and trusting relationships between clusters of institutions and providers. However, if we take these as 'givens' the concept appears to offer a way forward in enabling the "*specialisation and market identity of subsets*" under a single umbrella that reflects the diversity of the sector as a whole.

How the State can support the evolution and progression of the sector

This was viewed as a key issue. There was a strong view that there needs to be leadership from Ministers, the Department and the Learning & Skills Council in "*setting the agenda*" to achieve the vision for 2025, "*but to leave the sector with enough space*" to make the vision happen.

We recognised that the State has an important role to play "*in looking after the welfare and well-being of citizens*" and, an equally important role, in ensuring the competitiveness and prosperity of the country. The further education sector is fully involved in helping carry out both of these roles. It has also been tasked with stimulating demand for employer and self-financed learning.

It is likely that all of these elements will be as much in demand in 2025 as they are today. What it is felt is needed is "*more space and encouragement for innovation.*" It was acknowledged by those working within the sector that they are "*disinclined to be innovative and take risks.*" While they felt that there is a policy push encouraging them to be so, it feels that practical support is often thin on the ground. "*It feels as if by giving so much attention to regulation and how it should change, we never think of innovation outside of this context.*"

Yet, there is awareness that "*within the sector changes do need to happen.*" As one person said: "*We need to make some fairly radical changes, but doing so and weathering the fall out takes enormous energy.*"

One radical proposal put forward was "*to lower the school leaving age to 14 years.*" It was argued that this would provide the real push needed to create "*a genuinely inclusive general education system.*" The vision put forward would offer delivery of learning through a mix providers, including schools, colleges, independent providers and employers tailored to meet individuals' aspirations and needs. Provision would include pathways to level 3 achievement, Specialist Diplomas, Foundation Degrees and other recognised learning milestones.

Less radical but no less important was the suggestion that we should be less insular in our strategic development, and look to the devolved nations of Scotland and Wales, Europe and more widely to learn more about their directions of travel. The State also has a role in ensuring that there is connectivity between our learning system, qualifications and recognised professional competencies to ensure mobility for both learners and workers.

How the sector can show greater leadership, urgency and energy in moving forward

Alongside the leadership needed from the State, it was also recognised that much greater leadership was also needed from the sector itself. A top priority put forward by one person and strongly endorsed by many is that "*the sector must stop talking ourselves down.*" The 'talking down' not only damages the sector's reputation, it also can make those working in it feel undervalued and powerless. This is not the mindset which is ready to take on the challenge of change and look forward to 2025.

It was proposed that the 157 Group should lead in building the reputation of the sector, and quickly. A sense of confidence is needed to move forward and make the changes recommended in the Leitch Review. In many ways, this Review reinforces key messages in the Foster Review and White Papers. All have helped firm up the direction that the sector should take if it is to fulfil its role as the driving force in meeting the skills challenge.

Another proposal was for "*an institutionally-led debate² on new configurations of structure*" that will help the sector stimulate greater demand and carry out a wide range of types of delivery in a strongly branded and, at the same time, cohesive way. The vision put forward would be to create overarching structures with subsets that "*have strong individual identity.*"

It was pointed out that these new structural configurations should not be inward looking. One of the big challenges highlighted again in the Leitch Review is that the sector needs to build with other key players "*greater trust and a shared understanding*" of how to work in an inter-related way to achieve objectives.

We recognised that these issues weren't new ones. They've been bubbling away over the last few years. However there was a strong view that tackling these issues is becoming increasingly urgent if the sector is going to rise to the challenges it faces. The view put forward was that "*the sector shouldn't wait for 'guidance' on what it should do, but take the initiative itself.*"

² The definition of institutions includes independent and voluntary sector providers.

Endnote

As mentioned at the start of this Report the aim of this event was to **explore** what further education may mean in 2025, rather than reach any hard and fast consensus. What this journey of exploration did do is highlight both the changes in what individuals, employers the State will want from learning, and what is likely to be as valued in 2025 as it is today.

Though we recognised we were a long way off having a blueprint for where we want to be in 2025, we were moving, if at times too slowly for some, in the right direction. However, many agreed that now is the time to push hard on the accelerator in tackling key issues and, at the same time, to jettison unwanted baggage. It will be good for this group to come back together in, say, 12 months or so from now, to review the distance travelled and whether they feel that we are still on course.

Participants

Bill Rammell MP	Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further & Higher Education, Dept. for Education & Skills
Phil Hope MP	Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Skills, Dept. for Education & Skills
Stephen Marston	Director-General, Lifelong learning & Skills Directorate, Dept. for Education & Skills
Susan Pember	Director of Further Education, Learning & Skills Performance Group, Dept. for Education & Skills
Jane Williams	Director of Improvement, Dept. for Education & Skills
Mike Glycopantis	Deputy Director of Strategy, Funding & Performance Division, Dept. for Education & Skills
Mario Dunn	Special Adviser to Rt Hon Alan Johnson, Secretary of State of Dept. for Education & Skills
Beth Simpson	Team Leader, Further Education Policy Team, Dept. for Education & Skills
Andy Westwood	Leitch Review of Skills, HM Treasury
Rob Wye	National Director of Strategy & Communications, Chief Executive's Office, Learning & Skills Council
David Russell	National Director of Resources, Learning & Skills Council
Geoff Hall	Principal & Chief Executive, New College, Nottingham
Paul Head	Principal & Chief Executive, College of North East London
Paul Ashdown	Principal, Longley Park Sixth Form College
Stella Mgubaedu	Principal & Chief Executive, Highbury College
Frank McLoughlin	Principal, City & Islington College
Carole Timperley	Head of Contracting, A4e
David Melville	Vice Chancellor, University of Kent
Donald Rae	Assistant Director, Children & Younger Adults' Department, Derbyshire County Council
Chris Humphries	Director General, City & Guilds
Tom Wilson	Head, Organisation & Services Department, TUC
Mike Campbell	Director of Strategy & Research, Sector Skills Development Agency
Nick Isles	Director of Advocacy, The Work Foundation
John Stone	Chief Executive, Learning & Skills Network
Simon Tucker	Associate Director, Young Foundation
Leon Feinstein	Director, Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning
Ellie Russell	Vice President (Further Education), National Union of Students
Simon Wilson	Director WilsonSherriff & Associate Open Agenda
Jo Hudek	Director JHConsulting & Associate Open Agenda
Krysia Hudek	Director, Open Agenda & Fellow, St. George's House